Big Decisions

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by All_InProcess

Summary

Derek took off all the way across the country to Seattle after everything that happened with Mark and Addison. In the wake of that, the only thing that Mark could think to do was follow him, consequences be damned. He hadn't ever known life without Derek Shepherd before, and he had no intention of finding out now.

Notes

absolutely loved your idea of altering the way things played out with Meredith in Seattle. i just enjoyed the idea of Mark being the one to come out to Seattle for Derek rather than Addison. i hope you enjoy!!

Mark had stayed back in New York for as long as he did because he just assumed that Derek would be coming back. He figured that eventually the initial wave of anger would subside and that he would come back to the East Coast. And, even if the anger *didn't* subside, Mark figured that Derek would come back because who the hell would go to the West Coast and stay in *Seattle* when bright and sunny Los Angeles was just down the strip a little way? There was just no way that Washington was going to sink its claws into him, or at least that's what he'd thought a few months ago.

Now? Now he was walking out of the airport and into the damp, cool, Seattle air because he had run out of certainty that Derek was going to come back to New York on his own. Mark had bought a ticket and packed a bag. He'd looked up the directions to get to the hospital where Derek was apparently working now and booked a hotel room close by. What he *hadn't* done, however, was come up with a plan of what he was actually going to do or say when he saw Derek again. He didn't know how he was going to convince him to come back home, he just knew that he needed to.

If he was a better man, he would say that he was showing up to get Derek to come home to save his friendship with him, to save whatever might be left of Derek's marriage to Addison who was still licking her wounds back in the Eastern Standard Time-zone. Those were the types of reasons that people would accept and understand for Mark flying across the entire country seemingly on a whim. Hell, those were the types of reasons that would have people encouraging him to do something like that, offering to help and cover whatever was needed so that he would be able to do it. He'd let people believe what they wanted about his decision to go and find Derek, Addison included. But the truth of the matter was that his one-way ticket purchase wasn't anything so altruistic as trying to salvage his best friend's marriage.

Mark wasn't showing up in the hopes of convincing Derek to do what everyone else considered the right thing, to try and work things out with Addison, give it the old college try and if it didn't work *then* at least they could call it quits in good conscience. Mark was showing up to explain himself, to explain *everything*, and then get Derek to come back to New York. He could pull the plug on his marriage when he and Addison were at least back in the same area code. Once Derek did that, once he came back home and signed all the necessary papers, then Mark could get to getting to the real point of all this.

As he made his way through the hospital, Mark was keeping an eye

out for Derek. He was also mulling over the different options that he had, different opening lines and things that he could say. Here was no *good* way to break the ice after everything that had happened, but someone was going to have to say something. And, given the fact that Derek had put an entire country between them, Mark figured he would have to be the one to say something first.

He'd shown up looking for Derek, but before he found him he found a pretty girl entering patient information on the computer. Derek might've been the reason that he showed up in the first place, but Mark had never been the most focused person outside of work. Making a new friend or two in Seattle couldn't possibly hurt, especially since he didn't have any guarantees about how well or not Derek was going to receive him. Whoever she was, she didn't seem like she was upset about him trying to distract her from her job.

"Are you new here?" she asked.

He nodded. "Visiting. Confounded by all the rain, and it's only my first day in town." None of that information was untrue, per se.

"You get used to it."

Mark knew better than to do what he was doing, but knowing better hadn't ever stopped him before and he wasn't going to let it start stopping him now. He was still a free agent until he ended up finding Derek, and he hadn't found him yet.

"Are you hitting on me? In a hospital?" she asked, the smile on her face letting him know that she already had the very obvious answer to that question.

The smirk pulling at Mark's lip was more of a reflex now than anything else. "Would that be wrong?"

Her answer to his question came in the form of an introduction, a name that Mark knew even though he shouldn't have. If speaking to her hadn't been a bad idea before, it certainly was now. Still, she probably didn't know him, didn't know about all of it. And if she was willing to tell him her name, who was he to blow her off now?

He didn't get the chance to return the favor before Derek's fist cracked against his cheekbone and sent him tumbling to the ground.

While Derek was getting hauled off to the Chief's office, Meredith was left behind with Mark. He was halfway back to his feet when Meredith

held her hand out to help him up. His chuckle at the offer was followed by a wince because of the pull on his skin. He waved her off as he got himself back completely upright.

“Last time I took your hand I got punched in the face, don’t you remember?” He brushed his hands off on his pants. “Happened just a few seconds ago.”

She laughed, looking at the cut on his face, and then at him as a whole. “I remember.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Your first day in Seattle but it looks like you already have some friends.”

Reaching up, he gingerly poked at where he felt the cut on his face. “Friends that really missed me, too.”

She didn’t even want to hide how amused she was at the entire scenario. “I see that.” Tilting her head, she looked at the cut on his face again. “Come on, we should get that taken care of.”

Mark sat patiently on the edge of the bed in the exam room. There was something silly about the situation that he couldn’t articulate. That kind of ridiculousness that had him wanting to swing his legs as they hung off the edge of the bed while Meredith got the supplies needed to clean out the cut on his face.

“Derek and I did always have the same taste in women,” he said, figuring that most semblances of boundaries were now out the door and down the street.

“Excuse me?” she sounded surprised, but not in an offended way like Mark would’ve expected from most women.

There was no point in doing anything other than going for broke—there was no use in pretending that he knew *less* than what he did. “You’re Derek’s lusty intern, right? Heard about you all the way back in New York. You’re famous.”

“Oh did you?” she asked, shaking her head as she cleaned out his cut. “A one-night stand made me transcontinentally famous?”

“News about a dirty mistress travels far and fast.”

“Mm,” she hummed in thought. “Then that explains why I heard about you all the way here in Seattle.” She turned and started looking for more supplies. “Guess you and Derek aren’t the only ones with things in common.”

He was smiling even though she couldn't see it, even though it wasn't the type of thing a person should be smiling about. "We're the dirty mistresses."

Turning back around, she had the stitching supplies in her hands. "I suppose we are." He'd taken over the process of giving himself stitches, and Meredith was all too happy to sit back and watch after the initial sting of offense went away over him balking at the idea of her being the one to sew his face back together. She crossed her arms over her chest as she watched him. "Not to sound judgy at all, but—"

"Ah-ah," he joked, "no judgment here in the Dirty Mistresses Club."

She laughed. "I'm just saying I didn't know that I was even *joining* the Dirty Mistresses Club when I did. Accidental membership, if you will."

"Once you're in the club, there's no time for grey areas. You're just," he snipped the last stitch on his face, "in."

"And in with such fabulous company," she added on with that same smile still on her face.

"If I'm that fabulous," he set the tools to the side and got up from the exam table, "then maybe next time don't let Derek punch me in the face to defend your honor."

She laughed as she stepped towards the door to the exam room. "I don't think that Derek punching you had anything to do with my honor."

"No?"

"No," she pulled the door open, "I think it has to do with the fact that you were fully informed when you joined the Dirty Mistresses Club."

The two of them were talking and laughing as they walked out of the exam room and back into the hallway of the hospital. The scene itself wasn't all that much different from what it'd been leading up to Mark getting punched the first time. As the two of them were walking down the hall, Meredith intent on getting Mark as far as the nurse's station before leaving him to his own devices again. They were only a couple steps away when they heard someone scoff, both of them immediately turning their heads to find the source of the sound.

Sure enough, just across the way there was Derek. He stopped in his tracks, holding the ice pack against his knuckles as per Chief Webber's

instructions. He stopped and when Mark and Meredith saw him, they both stopped too. Meredith meant to stop smiling but forgot, trying to figure out if Derek was going to charge across from the other side of the nurse's station and come in for a second hit, maybe give him a matching cut on the other side, maybe rip open the stitches that Mark had just given himself.

Mark was trying to figure out the same as he froze. The frown on Derek's face wasn't one of sadness, no, it was all anger. Mark knew that look. He'd seen it plenty of times throughout the years and this was far from the first time it had been aimed in his direction. But even so, it still felt different. It felt different than when Derek looked at him like that when they were growing up. It felt different even when he'd been looking at Mark like that when he found him in bed with Addison. It felt different.

He wasn't given the opportunity to try and get into any of that with Derek, though. Instead, Derek decided that he was going to refuse to look at Mark. Focusing his attention on Meredith, he told her that he was going to need her when she was done with whatever she was doing. Neither her nor Mark were given the chance to try and say anything because he stormed off before they could.

"I think he's trying to break up the club," Mark said as Derek went up the stairs and out of sight.

Meredith chuckled, watching Derek instead of looking at Mark as she said, "The Dirty Mistresses Club?"

"The Dirty Mistresses Club."

Turning around, she faced Mark as she started walking backwards in the direction that Derek had just gone. "I'm not sure what you came to Seattle for, Mark, but you might just be better off going home."

"Who's gonna run the club, then?"

Meredith laughed and rolled her eyes, but didn't dignify the question with anymore of a response as she turned around and quickened her stride to catch up with Derek. Mark stood there by the nurse's station watching her go. He thought about what she said, replaying her words as he could feel the slight throbbing sensation in his cheek still. Turning around and heading right back to the airport probably would have been the sensible thing to do, but Mark Sloan was never a man that was particularly known for being sensible.

If leaving and going back to New York was the sensible thing to do, Mark didn't know how to categorize the decision not only to stick around in Seattle, but to jump onto a case at the very hospital that Derek was working at. The same hospital where he had gotten clocked within the first five minutes of being inside the doors. He didn't know what to call it, but that was exactly what he found himself doing.

He got himself on a case, much to Derek's dismay. But he was there and he was working and he found that as he continued on the case, the rain didn't bother him quite as much as it had on his first day in Seattle. He didn't love it, and he still hadn't begun to understand Derek's thing with ferry boats, but the rain didn't seem to suck as much when he had a case to keep him busy. A case that gave him a reason to stay in Seattle that wasn't the futile effort to explain himself to Derek and drag him back to the other side of the country.

Derek still hadn't spoken to him. They'd had a couple close calls, but Derek always managed to not actually say anything *to* Mark. That first day, he spoke to Meredith while Mark was laying on the floor, or standing right beside her. After that it had been the entire debacle with getting himself on the case at the hospital, and somehow throughout that entire conversation, Derek figured out how to only speak to Richard even though Mark was there, and also the main topic of conversation.

Outside of that, Mark couldn't even say that he'd really had any interactions at all with Derek. From the outside looking in, it could all be explained away as easily as saying that Seattle Grace was a big hospital, that Derek Shepherd was a busy and highly sought-after neurosurgeon whose cases didn't overlap with Mark's so they wouldn't have much of any reason to run into each other.

Mark wished that he was on the outside looking in so that he could chalk it up to that and not be bothered by it. But he was on the inside. Not only was he on the inside, he was smack-dab in the middle of all of it. He knew everything, and try as he might to try and block certain things out to do himself a favor, make himself feel better, he couldn't. Every time that Derek turned around and refused to get in the same elevator as him, went down a different hallway or diverted to the other side of a nurse's station, Mark was forced to remember everything all over again, nothing left out.

He was getting bombarded with the list of all the things that he'd done wrong when he saw Derek step onto the empty elevator. Mark waited a moment, watched as Derek reached and pressed the button

to take him down to the ground floor of the hospital. Derek's gaze stayed glued to the floor of the elevator, and Mark waited one more second before booking it closer.

The rapid footsteps got Derek to look up. Confusion quickly changed to annoyance when he realized what was happening. He reached, trying to hit the *"Close Door"* button in the hopes of saving himself from whatever this was about to be, but it was too late. Mark turned and slipped through the closing door right at the last second. It was too late to box him out, too late for Derek to escape.

Mark stood there and faced Derek, his eyes locked on Derek's face even if Derek was making quite the show out of looking everywhere except at him. He looked at the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the buttons that were absolutely useless to him moments before in helping him evade this situation. Mark let him keep his eyes on a swivel for another seconds before he finally spoke up.

"Eventually you're just going to have to look forward at me."

Derek huffed, but didn't say anything as he tilted his head back and stared up at the ceiling.

Mark's frustration came out in the form of a short laugh. He folded his arms across his chest. "You'll have to look at me. You'll have to talk to me. One of these days you won't be able to keep trying and pretending that I'm not here."

Derek's eyes snapped to Mark's face, his expression hardening. "I'm not pretending that you're not here, Mark," he grit out. "I'm aware that you're here, perfectly aware, actually. There is absolutely no pretending that you're not. You're here. In my city, in my hospital, in my goddamn elevator," he punctuated the statement by slamming his palm against the wall of their enclosed space.

The anger in his voice stung Mark in a way that he hadn't been expecting, not since he knew that it was coming. He'd known that when the ice finally broke between them it wasn't going to break in a way that felt all that good at first. Still, it hurt. It hurt and Mark did his best not to let it show as he cobbled together his response.

"This isn't your city," he finally said. Now it was his turn to look at anywhere else but into Derek's eyes.

It clearly hadn't been what Derek had been expecting him to say, because confusion flooded his face as he tried to process through those

four simple words. “What?”

“This, Seattle, it isn’t your city.” Mark gestured to one side of the elevator. “Your city is back on the East Coast. Your city—”

“No, no,” he cut him off as he shook his head. His tone was sharp as he continued to speak. “You don’t get to tell me what my city is and isn’t. You wanna know why? My city had to *change* because of you. My city used to be your city. And then you decided to sleep with my wife.” The elevator bell dinged and the door started to slide open. Derek started to move around and past him. “And now Seattle is my city.” He paused when he was back out on the hospital floor, watching as Mark turned around to face him. “You’re welcome to leave at any time.”

Mark felt like he was locked to the spot as he watched Derek turn around and start heading out to leave the hospital for the night. He hesitated so long that the elevator doors started to shut again. He didn’t cut it quite as close getting out of the elevator as he had going in.

As much as he wanted to run after Derek, chase him down in the parking lot, he knew that it wasn’t going to get him anywhere. He lingered outside the elevator long enough for Derek to get through the hospital doors before starting to walk in the same direction. Enough of a gap so that Mark could still see him, not so close that he looked like he was trying to follow and play catch-up.

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After their brief confrontation in the elevator, they went through yet another stint of not talking much. A few days went by and it was radio silence, Derek not saying anything and Mark not quite being sure what to say. At least Derek wasn’t sprinting away at the mere sight of him anymore. They’d shared elevators with each other and other people. They even managed to occupy the same stretch of counter at the nurse’s station when they were both swapping and checking charts. They could exist around each other. Or, rather, Derek could exist around Mark. That was progress, Mark decided, even if Derek still wasn’t speaking to him.

“I think we should put together a schedule,” Mark said as he sat down across from Meredith, the cafeteria chair scraping across the floor as he did.

She chuckled, leaning back in her seat. “A schedule?”

“Yeah.”

She placed a fry in her mouth. “A schedule for what?”

“Meetings for the Dirty Mistresses Club.”

“Oh really?” She laughed and shook her head. “How often should we have these meetings, then? Quarterly?”

He shook his head. “Way more than quarterly. How about weekly?”

“And what would we be discussing during these weekly meetings, hm? Since Derek still isn’t talking to you and I haven’t been his Dirty Mistress in a very long time now.”

“But he’s talking to you?”

She shrugged, nodding as she ate another fry. “Yeah. I’m an intern. An intern who sometimes gets farmed out to his service.” Another shrug, another fry. “We talk.”

“Right.”

There was a long pause before Meredith’s face lit up with recognition. “Do you want weekly meetings so you can pick my brain about getting Derek to talk to you again?” When Mark didn’t reply, she laughed. “Well, I hate to break it to you, but *I* didn’t exactly need to convince him to start talking to me again.” She watched the confusion on his face and pointed at him accusingly with another fry. “I’m the innocent Dirty Mistress, remember?”

He reached over and stole a pinch of fries from her plate. “An oxymoron if I ever heard one.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.” She watched him as he grumpily started to eat the fries he’d taken from her. “And it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t think I can help you with that.”

Mark knew that she was right and that there was no point in trying to pretend otherwise. He also knew that she wasn’t the person that he should be trying to convince of anything. Everything he wanted to commiserate to her about, were just things that he should be finding a way to talk to Derek about. The difficult part was just that she seemed perfectly content to talk to him and Derek still could hardly make sustained eye contact with him. If only it was all easy.

“Can’t believe we started this club and there’s not even any perks,” he finally said, a joking enough lilt to his tone to lighten the mood.

She chuckled. “Not *no* perks.” She nodded towards his hand that still had one French fry left in it. “You got some fries.” She was gearing up to say something else witty when her pager started beeping. Looking down at it, she took a deep breath before getting out of her seat. Looking at Mark again, she said, “You can have the rest of them too—I gotta go.”

“Gonna make me clean up your mess??” he called after her as she started to quickly walk away.

She laughed, sparing half a glance over her shoulder as she said, “There’s gotta be some perks for me too!”

Mark continued to watch her until she was out of his sight from the cafeteria space. Once she was gone, he decided that there was no point in not taking her up on the offer to at least finish the fries that she’d left behind. He stayed and watched everyone around him for a few minutes, not really hearing anything that people were saying. He only managed to stay sitting there for a few more minutes before he had to find himself to keep himself busy. Getting up, he cleaned up his own tray and Meredith’s before heading back into the hospital.

Walking across the floor, he bypassed the elevator and decided to take the stairs instead. Before coming to Seattle, he’d never thought twice about whether or not to take an elevator to get from one floor to the next, but after how the last few weeks had gone they’d taken on a liminal quality. He couldn’t figure out if that quality was cursed or not. So he took the stairs when it was convenient, like now when he only had to pop up one floor.

Mark was staring at the stairs passing beneath his feet when he heard a door above him open. He looked up, not pausing his movements as he did. He only froze when he saw that it was Derek who had walked through the door. Mark paused on the platform between flights, waiting to see if Derek was going to continue and be forced to walk by him, or if he was going to turn around and head right back through the door again. Derek looked down at him from where he was standing, his expression not giving anything away.

For a moment Mark couldn’t tell if he was more nervous or relieved when he saw that Derek continued walking in his direction. He didn’t move, deciding to wait until Derek inevitably found himself on the

same small landing in the empty, echoing staircase.

Judging by the way that Derek was making a point to stare at the floor and nowhere else as he continued to descend the stairs, Mark had a feeling that he wasn't exactly looking to stop and have a chat. He understood that, but he also didn't know when he was going to get another opportunity like this to talk to him in private. Or, rather, as close to private as they were going to be able to get in the hospital. Even their stints on the elevator together when it was just the two of them only lasted for a minute or so, sometimes even just a fraction of that. It wasn't enough time. It wasn't enough time and Derek had every excuse to not be looking at him. This was different though. There were no extra stops being made, no unspoken rules to not face the other person in the stairwell with him.

The reach for his arm was an impulsive one, but once it was done, it was too late to take it back. Mark wrapped his fingers around Derek's bicep, not a grip tight enough to hurt but it was enough to get his attention and get him to stop in his tracks.

It still took Derek a few seconds to suck it up and actually make eye contact with him. It took letting out a deep sigh and a dismayed glance up at the ceiling before he did. He looked at Mark, *really* looked at him for the first time in a long time. His gaze flickered back and forth between Mark's eyes as though he was looking for the words that Mark hadn't sucked it up enough to say yet.

All Mark could think about was that he couldn't remember the last time that he was this close to Derek for more than a fraction of a second. Other than passing each other in the halls, or when they happened to be swapping out patient charts at the same time. But even then, even when they were close, they weren't close like this. Mark wasn't touching him then, even with the layers of doctor's coats and scrubs acting as barriers between his hand and the warmth of Derek's arm.

He watched Derek watching him. He could see the way that Derek was trying to dissect what was going on inside his head. Derek's eyes narrowed slightly, getting those little crinkles at the edges. It was the type of questioning look that was usually accompanied by a smile, a question that was laced with amusement, but there was none of that this time. This time there was only exasperation and a little bit of curiosity on his face. Nothing more.

"You're gonna have to talk to me eventually, you know," Mark finally

said.

Derek tilted his head. “What exactly do you think there is to talk about?”

He scoffed, annoyed by the fact that the answer to the question was beyond obvious. Still, he couldn’t help but to notice the way that the cutting edge that had been in Derek’s voice the last time they spoke wasn’t there anymore. It still wasn’t friendly, per se, but the edges were slowly beginning to lose their sharpness. Mark tried to be mindful of his own tone as well, not wanting to set them back anymore steps than they’d already stumbled. “There’s plenty to talk about.”

“Yeah?” Derek didn’t look away from Mark’s face, not looking down to see how Mark was still holding onto his arm, not commenting on the sustained contact either. “Like what? Do you want to apologize for sleeping with my wife? For ruining my marriage? Our friendship? Do you want to talk about how you came all the way out to Seattle for no reason because there is nothing you can say that is going to convince me to go back to New York, to go back to Add—”

“If I said that I wanted to talk about any of that, would you listen?” Mark cut him off.

Derek finally pulled his arm away. “This is not the time.” He paused when he heard a door open a few floors above them. “Or the place.”

Mark did them both the courtesy of speaking quietly. “Well it’s not like you have been in the habit of giving me time. And we don’t exactly have any other place.”

They both paused as a doctor quickly scurried past them on the stairs. Both Derek and Mark managed to put semi-smiles and nod as the man walked by. But once it was just the two of them again their expressions took back on their former air of seriousness. Derek shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat as he waited to see if Mark had anything else to say.

“Still didn’t answer my question,” Mark said. Derek remained silent, so Mark repeated his previous ask. “Would you listen?”

Derek still remained silent, but the look on his face was one that let Mark know he was actually considering what he wanted his answer to that question to be. Mark hadn’t had much in the way of hope since he bought his ticket to Seattle, but the feeling he was experiencing

now was dangerously close to it. He tried not to let it show on his face too much.

“Fine,” Derek finally conceded, not looking particularly happy about it. “I’ll listen. You get one chance to try and explain yourself.”

Mark wasn’t a good enough actor to pretend that he wasn’t absurdly relieved at that answer. He nodded. “Alright, I’ll take that. Wh—”

“Come by my place tonight.”

Mark chuckled. “Don’t have faith that I got a nice hotel room?”

Derek rolled his eyes. “I’m sure it’s nice and I’m sure plenty of other people have seen it already, so I’ll pass.”

Despite the dig, Mark was still smiling. The sarcasm was a welcome type of familiar, even if it was at his expense. Derek was already continuing his way on the staircase when Mark called after him, “See you tonight!” All he got in response was Derek gluing his eyes to the staircase and shaking his head, but it wasn’t a reversal on the deal.

It crossed Mark’s mind for a moment as he made the trek out to Derek’s house that maybe he was getting some sick kind of payback with all of this. He’d been picturing Derek in a house or apartment somewhere where there were less trees and more people. He was just about to try and figure out how to turn around and head back towards civilization when he came to the clearing that housed the trailer that Derek was staying in. Not a house, not even an apartment, but a trailer. It really was always something with him.

The confusion must have been more evident on his face than he thought, because when Derek stepped out of the trailer and onto the makeshift deck that, he laughed and sounded like he actually meant it. He stood there, two bottles of beer in his hand, staring at Mark as he stood at the bottom of the steps.

“Not what you were expecting?” Derek was the first one to speak, sounding almost happy about it for the first time since he realized that Mark was in Seattle.

He shook his head as he made quick work of the steps. “Not exactly. Thought for a minute there that you might be putting me in the middle of The Most Dangerous Game.”

Derek shook his head as the two of them sat down in the chairs that

he'd set out. "Maybe if Seattle was an island."

Mark took another look around while Derek set the beer bottles on the small table between them. Now that he knew he hadn't been sent off into the middle of nowhere for the sake of karma and getting lost, he could really try to take in what was around them. It was quieter than Seattle, definitely way quieter than New York had been. But it wasn't quite silent—there were still birds and crickets and other critters that Mark hoped he would never have to become personally acquainted with.

"So when you left the city," Mark said, looking back to Derek instead of the darkening landscape around them, "you *really* left the city."

Derek huffed out a quiet chuckle through his nose before taking a sip from the bottle in his hand. "Staying in a hotel for an indefinite amount of time didn't exactly appeal to me."

Leaning forward, Mark braced his forearms on the edge of the table, careful not to knock it over. "You don't have to stay in a hotel *or* a trailer if you just come back to New York."

He shook his head, another sip just for the sake of killing a few seconds before having to speak. "That's not happening."

"C'mon—"

"I told you: Seattle is where I am now."

"Your wife know that?"

Derek locked eyes with him. "She would if she bothered to call."

"The phone works two ways, you know."

He pointed at Mark accusingly. "*She's* the one who went and—"

"Okay, yeah, and then *you're* the one who went and took off to the other side of the country." He slumped back in his chair. "We—she didn't think that you were coming out here to *stay*. We thought maybe it was a bender, a vacation. A couple weeks of silence as a good *'Screw you'* to the both of us."

He tilted his head. "Oh yeah? Then why are you the one who came out here and not her?"

Mark chuckled, a dry sound tumbling out from between his lips.

“Believe it or not, she didn’t think that you’d be too happy to see her.”

“I wouldn’t have been.”

“And she wasn’t ready to deal with that.”

“Really? And you were?”

Mark shrugged, doing his best to come off nonchalant as he took a swig of his beer. “I’ve been taking crap from you my whole life, Derek. I’m always ready to deal with it.”

“Me being angry at you for sleeping with Addison is your version of *taking crap* from me, then? That’s what this has been?”

“Didn’t say that it was crap I didn’t deserve to take.”

Derek chuckled half-heartedly at that. Mark had his fair share of flaws but moments like that reminded him that on the other side of the coin there was always some sort of a redeeming quality to go along with each.

“What do you want, Mark?” Derek asked, his tone neutral aside from the weariness in it. “What do you want from me?”

That question was far more loaded than Derek knew. It was a question that had right and wrong answers, especially in regards to what Mark was hoping for when it came to the end of all of this. Everything that Mark wanted was going to take more than one conversation and a couple of beers to get to, and while playing the long game had never been something he particularly liked, he knew it was his only option now. He did it to himself. So, rather than blurting out the first thing that came to mind, he tried to actually think through his answer.

“I want you to actually make some damn decisions.”

Derek let out a laugh in surprise, eyes widening not having expected that to be Mark’s response. “Really? Because my decision to come out here to Seattle doesn’t seem to be one that you’re overly fond of.”

“That’s not the kind of decision I’m talking about.”

“Well now you’re just getting picky.” He shook his head and took another sip of his beer.

Mark mirrored Derek’s movements as he tried to figure out if there was a graceful way to go about saying the things that he wanted to

say. Graceful had never been his strong suit with anything, and he usually could get away with that just fine. But he'd already scared Derek all the way to Seattle—he didn't know how much farther he could risk pushing him.

"You know what kind of decisions I'm talking about." He sighed, looking down at the bottle in his hands. "I'm talking about the kind of decisions that have to do with moving back across the country. With fixing your marriage." The ensuing pause felt purposeful. "Or not."

Derek leaned back in his chair. Looking up, for a moment he forgot that there was an awning above them and was disappointed when he was met with the sight of the fabric instead of the sky. He shut his eyes for a moment. He turned Mark's words over and over in his head. It wasn't as though it was the first time he'd thought about it. The decisions that Mark was so brashly asking him to make were ones that had been weighing heavy on his mind ever since he got to Seattle. The peace and quiet of the trailer and the land surrounding could have and would have been so much more peaceful for him all this time if he hadn't had those decisions hanging over his head. The thoughts blocked out the possibility for peace the way his trailer's awning blocked out the stars.

If only they had been easier decisions to come to. Or if not that, he wished that they were at least easy things to not think about. He didn't get to have either of those things. The decisions themselves were simple ones, sure, but they weren't *easy*. People seemed to conflate those two things all the time. Simple things weren't always easy. In Derek's experience, they hardly ever were.

When he looked at Mark again, he was still staring. The childish, impulsive part of Derek wanted to pitch his beer bottle at Mark's head even though there wasn't quite empty yet. He managed to find it in himself to fight the urge and not follow through on it.

"Staring at me isn't going to make me come to those decisions any faster," Derek finally said.

Mark chuckled. "Worth a shot. Besides," bringing the bottle to his lips, he drank everything that was left in his bottle before setting it back down on the table again, "I think you already made your decisions." He drummed his fingers on the outside of the empty container. "You just don't wanna follow through on it."

"Haven't had a real conversation with me in how long, and you think

you've got me all figured out?"

He grinned. "Couple months doesn't change a lifetime of knowing exactly how you operate."

There was a long pause, silence filled with nothing other than the ambient sounds of the woods around them. The two of them continued to stare at each other, waiting for the other to break first. Surprisingly enough, Derek was the first to crack. He chuckled quietly and shook his head before finally ending the staring contest.

Looking away from Mark, he said, "Yeah, maybe. But a few seconds of sitting there isn't going to change the last few months of me agonizing over this."

As much as he didn't want to let up, Mark knew that Derek was right. He would've sat there for as long as it took just for the sake of them getting to the bottom of this, but he knew that it wasn't possible. Even if it had been, Derek was the type to have to kick himself over it a few more times before he followed through on whatever decision it was that he'd come to.

"You done being mad at me at least?" Mark asked, the levity in his tone making the situation seem much lower-stakes than it really was.

Derek hummed, a smile on his face. "For now. Maybe." He let his head drop so that it was pressed against the back of his chair. "We'll see how I feel about you tomorrow."

Mark laughed. "Can't wait."

In the days that followed, Mark could feel the shift between them. He could feel how the walls that Derek had put up between them slowly started to come down one brick at a time. It wasn't exactly like how it had been before, how it'd been in New York—it probably couldn't ever be just like that ever again. But it was something, and Mark was thankful for that.

Every time that Mark saw Derek at the hospital, he wanted to ask if he'd made a decision yet. He'd stare, and he'd fight the urge to ask if he'd called a divorce lawyer or booked a ticket back home. Then he'd stare a little longer and he would see the wedding band on Derek's hand. He'd catch Derek twisting it sometimes if he was particularly deep in thought reading over someone's chart, or looking over someone's scans. An old habit that hadn't gone away yet, a strange comfort. Whenever he saw it happening Mark couldn't help but to

wonder just how entrenched in those old habits Derek was. He wondered if there were any that he was going to end up being willing to break.

When Mark came into the hospital, one of his first stops was the surgery board to see who was doing what and when each day. He liked knowing who was getting put on his team for his surgeries. He looked over the list and saw the names that he had come to recognize in the time that he'd spent in Seattle. One name that he didn't see, though, was Derek's.

He stared a little longer before peeling himself away to go and find the Chief to figure out what was going on. He made his way through the hospital, weaving through the people who were just getting there, the doctors coming in for their shift, overnight staff leaving at the ends of theirs, the families of patients who were coming back to be there just as visiting hours started. There was plenty of movement despite the fact that the day was just starting to get underway for most, but he didn't pay any of it much mind.

When he got close enough to Webber's office to see if anyone was inside, he saw Richard sitting at his desk, and he saw Meredith sitting in one of the chairs on the other side of it. He slowed down the closer he got, trying to gauge the looks on their faces and if this was the kind of conversation that he really wanted to try and follow up.

Before he got enough time to figure it out, Meredith stood up and made her way out of the office. All he could see was the back of Richard's head, but as Meredith walked out into the hallway, he immediately studied her expression. She didn't look upset, didn't look like she was about to cry or wanted to scream—that was good for him.

"Coffee with the Chief?" Mark asked with a disarming grin.

Meredith laughed as she shook her head. "Not quite." She glanced at the coffee cup in his hand. "Good thing, too, since it looks like that's what you're up to."

He looked at the cup in his hand. "No way. Chief can get his own cappuccino."

She was still smiling as she walked by him. "Good luck with your *not* coffee date, then."

Mark glanced over his shoulder at her. "When's the next club meeting?"

Meredith didn't turn around to face him as she spoke. "Whenever *you* bring *me* a cappuccino."

Mark laughed, watching as she went off across the catwalk towards the staircase. Once she was nearly out of sight, he got back to his task at hand. Returning his gaze to the Chief's office, he watched through the glass as the man flipped through paperwork. He thought on what he was doing for another couple of seconds, wondering if it was even worth it or if Webber would even give him any answers to his questions. Sure, the Chief had brought him on as a semi-permanent fixture in the hospital, but it wasn't as though they had any sort of real bond to speak of. Whatever dynamic Derek and the Chief had wasn't the same as what Mark and the Chief had, and it certainly wasn't what Mark had with Derek. Still, he'd never know if he didn't ask.

He knocked on the door and was beckoned inside almost immediately after. Stepping in, Mark purposely didn't push the door shut. This wasn't some big secretive conversation—no one else in the hospital was going to care as much about Mark's question and the Chief's answer to it as he was. He knew that, but he couldn't rationalize himself into not having those lingering tendrils of anxiety about it.

"What can I do for you, Dr. Sloan?" Webber asked as he looked up from the papers spread out on his desk.

He shook his head, lingering by the chairs in the office but not sitting down in one. "I noticed that Shepherd's name wasn't anywhere on the OR board."

Richard leaned back in his seat. "And?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, I just didn't think Derek was the type to take a sick day."

"You're right—he didn't." He paused, and when Mark just continued to look at him expectantly, Richard realized what was going on. "Did Dr. Shepherd not run his schedule by you before taking off for the rest of the week?"

Mark's eyes widened. "Rest of the *week*?" He tried to get his expression back under control. "Rest of the week," he repeated, his tone much more even. "He say why?"

Richard sighed, wondering when he was going to stop being caught in the middle of all this nonsense with the doctors working in his

hospital. “He clearly didn’t tell you why.”

Mark shrugged, trying to play it off casually. “You know how men are —we don’t…communicate.”

Webber responded with that look on his face that Mark would come to know all too well, that one that conveyed his confusion but also simultaneously let him know that he had no interest in asking for further clarification on whatever was confusing him. It was a look that Mark would grow to be thankful for later, even if it didn’t make much sense to him now.

“I’m assuming that ice he didn’t tell you, it’s none of your business.” He saw Mark take a deep breath to start making whatever counterarguments were on the tip of his tongue to get whatever he wanted, and the Chief decided to not only have Mark save his breath, but also save himself from having to listen to it all. “He went to New York.”

Mark’s face was the perfect picture of surprise once more. “N-New York?”

Richard nodded. “That’s what he said.”

“New York,” he repeated as he watched the Chief nod again. “For the rest of the week.” He paused. “And then he’s coming back next week.”

“Want me to call him on the phone and ask him, Dr. Sloan?”

Mark laughed because he knew that the Chief was being sarcastic, but there was a part of him that very much so wanted to dial an old familiar area code to get some answers.

Richard’s voice snapped him out of his land of hypotheticals. “Will that be all?”

Clearing his throat, Mark nodded. “Yes sir, that will be all.” He walked back towards the office door. “Thank you.”

For the rest of the day it was playing in the back of his mind, all of the possibilities for what conversations were happening between Derek and Addison. He wondered how hard they were fighting over everything from trinkets to entire pieces of real estate. Were they yelling and screaming and fighting? Were they even really speaking directly to each other at all or just having their lawyers do all the talking? Was Derek actually going to go through with it, or was sitting

across the table from Addison after so much time away going to make him realize how much he still loves her and wants to be with her? Questions that, as far as Mark was concerned, had no answers until proven otherwise.

It was agonizing waiting for Derek to get back to Seattle. If Mark had a single touch more desperation in him, he would've been waiting at the trailer to see Derek the second that he got home. Fortunately enough he was kept too busy at the hospital to be that type of desperate.

He was passed out in the on-call room when someone threw the door open. The clattering of it against the wall jerked him awake, but it wasn't until someone flipped the lights on that he groaned and propped himself up on his elbow.

"Listen, you can't just—"

"Figured I'd stop by, you know, check in since you were so worried about my absence," Derek said. He stood inside the doorway, arms crossed over his chest as he looked down at Mark.

He blinked his eyes open the rest of the way once he heard Derek's voice. He tried to force himself to sound more awake and put together than he was. "Chief mentioned that, huh?"

"Had no idea you kept such a close eye on my attendance."

He got himself into an upright position, the thin sheet pooling in his lap as he dragged his hands down his face. "How'd it go?"

"What?"

Mark narrowed his eyes at him. "What do you mean *what*? You went to New York."

As drained as Derek was from his stint in New York and everything that it entailed, there was part of him that was getting enjoyment out of dangling it in front of Mark the way that he was. He wasn't ready to talk about it, not in the serious way that Mark had been asking for since the second he showed up in Seattle. He wasn't ready for that conversation, but there was comfort in the mild torture of his lifelong best friend.

"Flights were fine. Thanks for asking." He rapped his knuckles on the doorframe as he turned and left. "Get some rest."

Mark was stuck there, mouth agape, as Derek disappeared from view. He dropped back onto the mattress with a groan as he stared up at the ceiling. There was no going back to sleep or getting more rest now, and it wasn't because Derek hadn't shut the lights back off when he left.

Meredith had her nose in a textbook when someone pulled out a chair across from her at the small cafeteria table where she was sitting. She didn't look up until she heard the unique clicking sound of a cup being set in front of her on her side of the table. Lowering her book, she was surprised to find Mark Sloan sitting across from her, looking wired in a way that she didn't think she had seen before.

"Coffee?" she asked with a laugh as she nodded towards the cup in front of her.

"Cappuccino. Price of admission for the next meeting of the Dirty Mistresses Club, right?"

She closed her book and set it off to the side so that she could swap it out for the drink that Mark had brought her. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He didn't waste any time. "You talk to Derek?"

"What about?"

"He went to New York."

She sipped on her coffee before responding. "I didn't know that."

Mark let out a dejected sigh. "He didn't tell you?"

She laughed. "Why would he?"

He waved her off as he stood up. "You're useless."

Her jaw dropped but there was still amusement all over her face. "Hey!"

He was already walking away. "You're just lucky I don't take that damn cappuccino back!"

Somehow, over the course of the next few days, Mark felt almost as helpless as he had with Derek when he came to Seattle in the first place. Only now it wasn't Derek ignoring him or trying to beat him down with cutting remarks and arguments. Now it was Derek looking

him in the face and offering him jokes and commentary and opinions on surgeries, saying plenty and somehow also saying nothing at all.

“Joe’s?” Mark finally caught Derek as he was heading out of the building. No excuses of having to take off for surgeries or consults. Maybe after a couple drinks he could pull some real answers out of him.

The question got Derek to stutter in his step for a moment as he considered it. He watched Mark as he caught up and landed next to him. “You wanna go to Joe’s?”

Mark shrugged as the two of them continued walking. “That seems to be what you all do around here.”

Derek chuckled. “Wow, you’re really settling into Seattle, huh?”

“You didn’t leave me much of a choice.”

“Don’t act like I’ve been holding a gun to your head keeping you here.”

“I’ve been trying to get you to go back to New York all this time and the one time you went you didn’t tell me or bring me, so—”

“And then I came back to Seattle,” Derek cut him off, his tone even as ever.

Mark’s shoulders dropped in defeat. “Right.” Clearing his throat, he tried to recover. “So, Joe’s?”

Derek nodded. “Sure. Joe’s.”

It almost felt like old times. It was late and they were laughing as Joe cleared their empty glasses off the surface of the bar and replaced them with full ones. They talked about the hospital, about the insanity of the cases they were working on. They talked about the interns and how ridiculous they were and how they couldn’t ever remember being like that when they were at that stage in the game.

Derek had that grin nearly branded onto his face, the one that Mark remembered last seeing in New York a long time ago. Back before Seattle was a thought in anyone’s mind, back before the weeks of silence, back before the affair. The last time Mark saw Derek grinning that big for that long felt like an entirely different lifetime.

It felt like a different lifetime but the feeling bubbling in the pit of Mark's stomach was everything that he remembered it being back then, too. A lot of things were different now, but Derek still smiled like that and it still sent a wave of warmth across Mark's chest whenever it happened. He never felt like he could try and say that, either. All those years, before Addison, during Addison, he could've said something but he just never did. It felt futile then. But now it felt necessary. Now it felt like all he would feel was regret going forward if he didn't say anything.

Mark studied Derek's face as he thanked Joe for the refill on his drink. Whatever happened next couldn't possibly be that bad, right? They had already survived the worst thing. The worst thing had happened and they survived all the months of silence and fights that ensued after the fact. That was out of the way and there was no way that could happen again. Especially not about this. If Mark said something, even the worst case scenario would be something they could come back from.

"Derek—"

"You're staying in Seattle now too, you know that?" Derek asked with a laugh, not even having heard what Mark had been trying to say.

Mark cocked his head in confusion. "What?"

He laughed again, nodding before taking a drink from the glass Joe had just put in front of him. "Yeah. All this time you've been telling me that I picked Seattle, and that I need to go back to New York, but you…you stayed. You're still staying! Got yourself a job and everything." He chuckled, drumming his fingers on the surface of the bar. "Seattle is yours now too."

Mark felt his heartrate spike and he couldn't look Derek in the eyes for a second. He cleared his throat before saying, "So you're not going back then. To New York."

He shook his head. "I'm not, no."

He huffed, something that almost sounded like a laugh but it was meaner than that. "Alright then."

Derek's brows knit in confusion. "What?"

"What?"

“What was that? That sound?”

Mark shook his head and downed the last of his drink. “There wasn’t a sound.”

“There was. There was a sound. You’ve been telling me to make a decision all this time and now I did and now you’re making sounds at me.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to New York,” Mark’s voice was quiet but sharper than usual. “You left without saying anything, again. You didn’t tell me you were going to New York and you didn’t tell me what you were doing when you were out there. You came back and acted like nothing happened.”

“Of course something happened!” Derek tried to sound at least a little angry but he was just drunk enough for it not to land the way he wanted it to. “God. You know why I didn’t say anything? You know why I haven’t talked to you about it?” He turned on the barstool so that he was completely facing Mark. “Because I figured you of all people would know exactly what happened out there. You knew what was going to happen when I got on that plane.” He sighed. “That’s why I didn’t tell you. That’s…that’s why I haven’t said anything.” He scoffed but there was no bite behind it. “Was all your fault anyway.”

Mark knew that he shouldn’t laugh but he did. “Yeah. All on me. No one else had anything to do with any of that.”

Then they were both laughing, at themselves at the situation. At the sheer ridiculousness of it all when they looked at everything all put together the way that it was. Derek polished off the drink Joe had given him faster than what was wise. Joe made the executive decision to call cabs for both him and Mark, knowing that if he didn’t they would try and stumble on back to the hospital and they’d never hear the end of it. Joe probably would end up not hearing the end of it either.

He only told them that he’d called rides for them when they showed up—there was less argument that way. He simply told them it was time to square up their tabs and go, and they groaned but never fought back in a way that mattered.

As the two of them practically teetered out onto the sidewalk, Derek placed his hand onto Mark’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I’m glad you’re here.” He flashed that same grin that had made countless people’s knees knock together over the years. “I’m glad we both

picked Seattle."

Mark wanted to tell Derek that only one of them really chose Seattle, that he was just here by default. But Derek hopped into the cab that was waiting for him and they were cruising off into the night before Mark could sharpen the comment to have the amount of wit that he preferred. As the cab turned the corner out of sight, he figured it was probably better that way.

The next morning, Mark woke up with a mild throbbing in the back of his head. It would go away after a glass of water and a couple of aspirin, but he could only imagine how Derek was feeling. Their job wasn't the type that you could show up wearing sunglasses when you were hungover, but he was willing to bet that Derek wished it was.

Mark made his way to the lounge for coffee for once—it was quieter in there and the lights weren't as severe. Part of him was hoping that he would come across Derek, but instead he found Meredith sitting at the table, multiple books spread out in front of her.

"Did you even go home?" Mark asked.

She hummed in amusement but didn't look up from her work. "Thought you knew better than to ask stupid questions."

He chuckled. "Ouch." Stirring his coffee, he said, "Did you hear?" He waited for her to look up at him. "We are no longer members of the Dirty Mistresses Club."

Resting her chin in her hand, she asked, "How did that happen?"

"Derek went to New York to divorce Addison."

"*Ah*," she said, eyebrows raised as she nodded. "I see. I just…I didn't realize it was a retroactive thing."

"Can't be mistresses if they're divorced."

She smiled. "Very sound logic, Dr. Sloan." She paused, looking at Mark as he stirred his coffee and took another sip. She waited for him to have some follow-up commentary about the news he just broke to her, but there was nothing. So, while he was sitting kitty-corner to her, she asked, "Does this mean that you're going back to New York, then? Since he's going to stay here?"

Confusion contorted his features. "What?"

“What? You came to get him to go back to New York for Addison, right? And he’s not, so—”

“I wasn’t here to get him to go back to New York for *Addison*,” he argued with more gusto than he meant to, more than he should have.

And Meredith clocked it immediately. Her expression shifted, her smile changing but not disappearing. “Who *did* you want him to go back to New York for, then?”

Mark narrowed his eyes. There was no pretending that she hadn’t figured him out, but he wasn’t going to sit there and talk with her about it. “I liked you better when you were a mistress.”

She laughed. “That’s fair.” Grabbing her pen, she tapped it against the book in front of her. “What are you going to do about it?”

He shook his head as he stood up and headed for the door. “I’m not talking to you about this.”

Meredith was already looking back down at her book as she said, “Not yet, anyway!”

Throughout the rest of the day, Mark found himself fluctuating back and forth between wanting to seek Derek out and wanting to avoid him completely. He thought that after so many years he would be done with that feeling. He would walk by the surgery board to see if Derek was operating or if he was still running the risk of bumping into him in the halls or the lounge.

The nerves, the jitters, whatever people wanted to call them, they had always clung to him in some way, shape, or form. The older he got, the less it got to him, the less it bothered him. He’d always had Derek somehow, even if it wasn’t the way he wanted, and for a while that had been enough. But then he started pulling away. And then he left. But now they were both in Seattle and for the first time in a long time there was the possibility of *something*. Mark had given up on that a long time ago when Addison had come into the picture, but now? Now it felt like things had shifted again and that he should be taking advantage of it.

He wondered if anything remotely like this had ever crossed Derek’s mind. Maybe not while he was with Addison, but before. Back when they were young and things didn’t seem quite so serious, things didn’t carry that same kind of weight that they did now. The stakes felt so high now, higher still because Mark had already nearly cost himself

Derek once and he didn't want to do that again.

By the time that Mark saw Derek again, he was a few days removed from his hangover. He walked into the elevator after Mark first thing in the morning. There was a smile on his face as usual, and Mark was waiting for some cheesy, overused line like, "Long time, no see," or, "Fancy meeting you here," delivered with that touch of sarcasm that Derek used all the time and always got away with. But nothing came. Instead, Derek stood silently next to him as the doors slowly slid closed.

Derek looked up at the ceiling, still smiling as Mark looked over at him and tried to figure out what to say to start a conversation. This wasn't supposed to be difficult. Things were good now and having conversations with Derek in elevators was no longer supposed to be a tough thing to navigate. But now that there was no anger between them, no wife, all Mark was left with were the feelings that he couldn't ever risk saying out loud before.

He wasn't sure where his sentence was going to go when he drew in a dramatic inhale, but he figured that saying *something* had to be better than saying nothing. The first syllable was forming at the back of his throat when Derek stopped him.

"Don't say Joe's," he said with a laugh. "I'm not," he shook his head, "I can't do that again. Felt like I was nineteen again."

Mark chuckled, the knot in his stomach not completely going away but loosening slightly. "'Til you woke up the next morning."

"Yeah—don't remember hangovers like that when I was nineteen."

He let out a quiet hum of amusement. Letting a beat pass, he said, "I wasn't gonna suggest Joe's."

The elevator dinged and the doors opened up again to drop them off on the ground floor. They quickly fell into stride with one another as they approached the exit. It was dark out, and much later than either of them thought it was when they had gotten their belongings.

"Well," Derek said as they stepped outside, "whatever you were going to suggest, don't." He shook his head, the exhaustion of the day catching up to him, like there was some force at play within the walls of the hospital that kept him going that he didn't get to have anymore now that he was leaving.

Mark exhaled sharply through his nose. Derek's comment had no second layer to it, or at least, he didn't mean for it to. To him it was a two-dimensional thing. But not for Mark.

Reaching over, Derek patted Mark on the back between his shoulder blades. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah," Mark forced out, not wanting to get into it all in the middle of the Seattle Grace parking lot.

He stayed on the edge of the sidewalk while Derek went deeper into the parking lot to get to his car. Mark watched as he disappeared into the rows of vehicles. Digging his hand into the pocket of his jacket, he fished out his own set of car keys. It wasn't until Derek's car left the lot that he could even get his feet to move and take him to his own car.

He sat in the driver's seat of his car for a minute. The keys were in the ignition but he didn't turn them. He weighed his options out. He could easily just head on home, spend the night staring up at the ceiling in his apartment. He could go to Joe's alone, leave with some random girl or one of the nurses that went to decompress after a long shift. Both of those options would've been easy and familiar. And yet he still sat there unsure of what he was going to end up doing next.

Even as he pulled up outside of Derek's trailer, he still wasn't sure what he was doing or where he was going with any of it. He threw his car into park but didn't cut the engine just yet. It was dark out, but there was still a warm light coming out from the windows of the trailer. Mark was sure that if he sat there long enough, he would eventually see Derek's silhouette passing through the yellow lights.

Before he could talk himself into putting his car in reverse and turning right around to head home, he yanked the keys out of the ignition. The headlights went off, and the world got even darker than it had been before. Mark let out the deepest sigh that he had in a long time before pushing the door open with the ball of his foot and stepping out of his car.

The grass was already wet with the next morning's dew as Mark dragged his feet through it. He went up the steps and onto the deck. It only took half a step more for him to be all but right up against the door. Taking another deep breath, he lifted his hand to knock against the door, ready for the metallic clanging to disturb the otherwise quiet night scene.

Right before his knuckles rapped against it, Derek pushed the door open from his side. It made Mark stumble back a step. When both of them were face to face, neither of them could hide the surprised looks on their faces.

Derek was already in his pajamas, and it was one of the few times in his life that Mark felt overdressed for an occasion. Derek looked surprised, confused even, but not upset the way most people would be if Mark turned up at their door unannounced in the middle of the night.

Derek chuckled as he leaned against the side of the door. “I know I said not Joe’s but—"

“I didn’t pick Seattle,” Mark blurted out and cut him off.

Derek was still smiling but there was more confusion on his face now. “What?”

“I didn’t *pick* Seattle. I hate the rain. I still don’t get your obsession with ferry boats. There is no place here that has pizza or bagels anywhere near as good as New York.” He sighed. “I didn’t pick Seattle.”

He nodded, wanting to understand where this was going but not quite grasping it. “Noted. You didn’t—”

“*You* picked Seattle. You. I helped Addison break your heart and so you chose Seattle because you like ferry boats and for some godforsaken reason only having five days of nice weather a year doesn’t bother you. And I still don’t think I get it. I don’t think I ever will.” He paused, not knowing where he was taking all of this next—Derek had always been the one with the speeches. “But I’m picking you. I’m picking you and you picked Seattle so I’m here. When I came here, all I wanted was to get you to call it quits with Addison and come back home. I wanted you to just…admit that it was over so we could figure it out from there.”

Derek’s brows knit together. “Figure what out?”

Mark laughed, feeling a lump forming in his throat out of nowhere. “You weren’t just pulling away from Addison, you know that? Back before all of this. You pulled away from me too. And I’d been fine until then. You were with Addison and I made myself okay with that because you were happy. But then you weren’t, and you cut me out over it too. She was all I had when I didn’t have you anymore and I…I

never thought that would happen. I never thought I wouldn't have you." He made a sweeping gesture at all the land behind him. "And then you—"

"And then I picked Seattle," Derek finished for him.

Mark's shoulders slumped in relief. "Yeah." He dragged his hands down his face. "So now we're both here and this is the first time since I can remember that I could say something to you and it might actually matter."

Derek's lips dipped into a frown. "It always mattered."

He scoffed quietly. "You know what I mean."

"Okay then," Derek said with a nod. "What else?"

"What?"

"What else do you want to say? Besides how much you hate Seattle?"

It was just enough of a tension-breaker to get Mark to smile. "I'll stay here, and I'll even learn to like it, if I'm here with you."

"You're—"

"I mean *with* you, Derek. I sat back and pretended that this was all enough for a long time and I don't wanna do it anymore. You will always be my best friend, but I want more than that too. I can," he stepped in closer, "I can give you more than that."

The few seconds of silence that followed felt like an eternity for Mark. Derek was standing there looking at him, not frowning but not fully smiling either. Mark felt like Derek was looking directly into his soul and yet he couldn't get a read on the man in front of him to save his own life. His heart thundered inside his chest and all he could do was try and cobble together some sort of exit strategy, some way to give Derek an out from all that had just been dumped on him. Not that any of his thoughts were coherent enough for that.

"Okay," Derek finally said with a nod.

Mark wanted to be relieved but he wasn't committed to the feeling just yet. "Okay?"

Derek laughed, a real smile breaking out across his face like he couldn't believe what was happening. Mark couldn't quite believe it

either. "More than this." He nodded. "Sounds like it could be pretty damn good."

That was when it hit him, the real and honest sense of relief. That feeling that he hadn't felt since he touched down in Seattle, or even a long time before that if he really thought about it. But he heard the happiness in Derek's voice, saw the way the edges of his eyes crinkled as he smiled, and he allowed himself to feel and enjoy the relief. Not only that, but he allowed himself to feel hope, too.

The sense of hope started in his chest and spread out to every other inch of his body. In the wake of it, Mark finally felt like he could get himself to move. For the first time in his entire life, he got to follow through on one fo the few impulses in his life that he ever fought off. Leaning in, he pressed his lips against Derek's. It wasn't as brazen a gesture as it usually was for him, not when it mattered this much. It was the first time in years that he felt nerves about kissing someone. But then Derek kissed him back and before he knew it, Mark found himself pressing Derek back against the doorframe as he kissed him.

When Mark pulled away, he couldn't go very far since they were jammed in the doorway of the trailer. He could feel the warmth rolling off of Derek, from Derek's breath against his skin, bleeding into his palms through the thin cotton of the t-shirt that Derek was wearing. He was close, but not so close that he couldn't still see the smile pulling at Derek's lips. All of that and he knew that if he leaned in just a little more, he would probably be able to feel Derek's heartbeat through his chest. They'd spent so many years so close and yet it'd never felt like this.

After another second of comfortable, electricity-filled silence, Derek nodded towards the inside of the trailer. "Come on."

Mark followed right on Derek's heels, the metal door clanging closed behind them. As he looked around the inside of the trailer, be couldn't help but to be thankful for all the plans that he didn't make. A one-way ticket to Seattle had felt ridiculous when he'd done it. Showing up to Derek's trailer in the middle of the night felt insane right up until the moment that it didn't. He shrugged off his jacket and, as he tossed it aside, he was thankful for every impulsive decision he'd made, and every decision that Derek had agonized over. Because for all of the mess that they'd put each other through, it was hard to believe now that it hadn't all been worth it.

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